

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**STATEMENT BY**  
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**Regarding National Native HIV/AIDS Awareness Day 2008**

March 20, 2008 marks the second annual National Native HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. This day gives us another opportunity to recognize that HIV/AIDS is a critical and growing health issue within our Native population. Once again, we can avoid complacency and increase awareness of the impact of HIV/AIDS on American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.

American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) are ranked third in the nation in the rate of AIDS diagnosis compared to all other races and ethnicities. We also face additional health disparities that contribute significantly to the risk of HIV transmission such as substance abuse and sexually transmitted infections. Amongst our people, HIV/AIDS exists in both urban and rural populations (and on or near tribal lands); however, many of those with HIV are not aware of their status. Nationally nearly 25% of the one million Americans with HIV are unaware they are infected. An estimated half of new HIV infections are spread from people who are not aware of their status.

These statistics, risk factors and missed opportunities for screening illuminate the need to go beyond *raising awareness* about HIV and begin *active integration* of initiatives that will help routinize HIV services. If the status quo remains in our Native population, prevalence will continue to increase and we may face an irreversible problem. Therefore, we must change the way we discuss HIV, change (and improve) the way we integrate HIV testing into our health services, and firmly establish our linkages and access to care. Ultimately, we can do our part to reduce the stigma that surrounds HIV/AIDS within our health culture.

National Native HIV/AIDS Awareness Day also gives us the opportunity to thank dedicated staff that continues to provide HIV prevention, testing, and treatment services in the face of limited resources and competing priorities. Tribes, community organizations, and health departments will be holding many events on this day of advocacy, such as free HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis screening, HIV trainings, sunrise ceremonies, walks, basketball tournaments, and others. Please review an interactive map of activities across the country: <http://www.nnaapc.org/news/nnhaadmap.htm>. I encourage all staff and community members to take part in this special day to not just raise awareness, but to *implement* change.

For Mr. McSwain's Public Service Announcements, press statement and information on National Native HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, please visit our IHS HIV Program website <http://www.ihs.gov/MedicalPrograms/HIVAIDS/> or the AIDS.gov website [www.AIDS.gov](http://www.AIDS.gov). To locate a testing site near you, please visit [www.hivtest.org](http://www.hivtest.org).